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ABSTRACT

This course guide for black literature recommends three specific themes for each of three literary genres: (1) the junior novel--Man's Relations to Mankind and to Self in "The Troubled Summer" by Ben Haas (grade 8); (2) drama--Human Relations and Values in "A Raisin in the Sun" by Lorraine Hansberry (grade 9); and (3) biography--Character and Conflict in "A Choice of Weapons," an autobiography by Gordon Parks (grade 10). Included in the outline for each genre are sections covering (1) teacher purposes and desired student outcomes; (2) an overview of the particular literary work; (3) content of the work; (4) procedures and activities proposed for study; (5) discussion topics concerning point of view, setting, theme, characters, and symbols; (6) evaluative techniques; and (7) student and teacher resources. (JMC)

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AFRO-AMERICAN LITERATURE UNITS *

GRADE 8

Genre: The Junior Novel

Theme: Man's Relations to Man and to Self

THE TROUBLED SUMMER
by Ben Haas

OBJECTIVES

Teacher Purposes

To provide a climate conducive to overcoming student reluctance to reading

To help students examine and gain insight into a current social problem centered in human values

To reinforce understanding of the elements of the structure of a junior novel

Desired Student Outcomes

Enjoys a personal experience with literature

Gains social insight into the racial problem threading the novel's plot

Identifies with some of the characters and develops empathy for those with values different from his own

Develops greater objectivity in assessing human values, including his own

Continues to develop discussion skills

Grows toward overcoming reading reluctance

OVERVIEW

Because of its suspenseful plot, the youthfulness of the main characters, the reasonable approach to racial conflict, the simple and appropriate language, and the brevity of the story, The Troubled Summer, a short paperback novel concerned with current racial tensions, seems especially appropriate for less able or reluctant readers in Grade 8. Students of this age group who have limited skills in reading are just as seriously groping for human values as are the more capable students and

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are perhaps in greater need of guidance in their search. This novel provides situations which should encourage these students to examine objectively a wide variety of values within the framework of a racial conflict.

To accept the status quo or to bring about desirable change? To bring about change in violent or in peaceful ways? These are choices that have real meaning for today's adolescent, for he plays a key role in a society in the throes of making painful decisions. This novel does not give the answers, but its story is provocative enough to stimulate the young reader to begin to assess more objectively and less emotionally the actions, attitudes, dreams, and frustrations of people. Through such objective examination, the adolescent may also grow towards a better understanding of himself.

CONTENT

Character is the product of the total human condition or experience. Values differ with time and place, and what was once valued may change in nature or may be discarded altogether.

Maturity develops as one is able to discard selfish goals for humane ones.

Conflict results both from forces within the protagonist and from forces resulting from the environment.

Developing an empathy between people with differing value systems tends to generate new values.

PROCEDURES

Frequently the slow reader becomes frustrated at the mere mention of plans to read a narrative of any great length. For this reason it is important to establish a comfortable classroom climate before the novel is assigned for initial reading. The following are suggested as ways such a climate might be effected:

Plan a thematic bulletin board display of pictures related to minority groups. (See back copies of such magazines as Life, Look, Newsweek.) Devote a class period to a student discussion of the pictures as an opportunity to assess the present attitudes of the students toward racial problems. Later, after the novel has been read and discussed, the teacher may wish to assess any changes in attitude that may have taken place.

Arrange a wide variety of paperbacks in a reading area. (See list at the end of this illustrative unit.)

Read aloud to the class a short story concerned with a minority group such as Langston Hughes's "One Friday Morning," and have students react to its plot and characters. Discuss the literary concepts introduced in the short story in order to prepare the students for discussion of the novel. Included may be such terms as plot, setting, character, protagonist, conflict, flat (underdeveloped) and round (developed) characters, climax, theme, and resolution.

Before The Troubled Summer is assigned to the students, read aloud the first chapter to motivate students to read the novel. Because this chapter is concerned with Clay's being called by the school's principal to his office to be reprimanded, students of similar age will respond to the situation with quite definite feelings.

After the copies of Troubled Summer have been distributed, the first chapter has been read and discussed, and each student has had some time for examination of the book, the teacher should plan with the students the procedure they wish to follow for the initial reading. The able readers may wish to read silently; others may wish to form a group to listen to the teacher read aloud; while still others may wish to form a group in which students read sections of the novel aloud in turn. In addition, teachers may wish to prepare a short study guide of five or six questions to help students in their reading.

The Troubled Summer is a short and uncomplicated story; therefore, it is suggested that the in-depth study center around discussion of the novel as a whole. As slow readers can seldom sustain discussion for long periods, it is further suggested that the questions which follow be discussed in segments, allowing not more than a half period of discussion for each segment.

Story Line

What happens in the story?

To test student understanding of details of the story line, ask them to number the following incidents to show the order in which they appear in the novel:

( ) Clay hooks but loses Old Cannonball.
( ) Mr. Wakefield arrives to suggest civil rights action.
( ) Shad and Jack attack Clay and Andy.
( ) The Klan attempts to kill Mike by shooting through the window at Uncle Will's.
( ) Mike catches Old Cannonball.
( ) Clay has an opportunity to kick Shad, but he does not.
( ) The Klansman attempts to dynamite the church.
( ) Andy and Clay observe a meeting of the Klan.

Which episodes were the most exciting? How did you feel about them? (To the teacher: The attack on Clay by the Klansmen, the confrontation at the church on the painting day, the hooking of Old Cannonball, the dynamite episode—these and other suspenseful incidents should evoke strong student reactions.)

What is the climax (the turning point) of the plot?

How does the story end for Clay and Mike?

Is the story's ending logical? Give reasons for your answer.

What do you think the town of Ardmore will be like after this troubled summer? Give reasons for your opinion; and, wherever possible, support your thinking with evidence from the text.

What do you think the future holds for each of the following characters: Clay, Andy, Rita, Mike, Mr. Marsh, Shad and Jack, Uncle Will, Louisa Williams? Explain each of your predictions, basing your explanations on references from the book.

Point of View and Setting Understandings

What is the setting of the story?

Is the setting right for the story? Could the same story have had another setting with equal effectiveness?

From what point of view is the story told? Do you think the story could have been just as effectively told by Clay? Explain your answer.

Is the author fair in his treatment of the two races? Support your opinion by giving specific examples from the text.

Character Understanding (two discussion periods)

Who are the characters in the novel? Which ones are the important (developed) ones? The minor (undeveloped) ones? How are they interrelated?

Who is the protagonist? What two major conflicts must he resolve? (Hatred of all white people and frustration because of his position in a society which he considers unjust)

What is Clay's attitude toward white people? Is he justified in that attitude? After his encounter with Shad, how does his attitude affect his conduct with those he loves? (pp. 32-37)

In what ways are Clay and Andy alike? Different? Which one do you like better? Why?

Do the attitudes of Andy and Clay change during the course of the story? If so, what changes occur? What brings about the changes? (See chapter 10 and page 149.)

Do you think that Clay's first attitude towards Mike Britton changes? Explain your reasoning.

Refer to the text to find passages which show that Clay's feelings about Mike undergo gradual change. When does all of his dislike for Mike disappear? Do you think that Clay's final acceptance of Mike will change his attitude towards other white people? Why or why not?

Why do you think that white people such as Mike work for racial equality?

Read Uncle Will's speech on page 66 which begins "He's literally risking his life...." Do you agree with Uncle Will? Why or why not?

What does Mike's speech on page 67 beginning with "He thinks it's a good thing...." tell you about a possible reason for his attitude towards racial problems?

What does Rita's speech on page 129 beginning with "I don't know where they get the nerve...." tell you about her?

Evaluate each of the following characters, explaining how you regard each person: Mr. Marsh, Rita, Uncle Will, Louisa Williams, Dr. Keller, Jack, Shad, Sheriff Harlow, Mike Britton.

Which characters in the story are round (developed) characters? Which ones are flat?

Theme and Symbol Understandings

It is often slow work helping less able students to verbalize the theme; therefore, the teacher will need to be sensitive to the ability and attention span of the students.

The theme is the controlling idea of a literary work. It cannot be dogmatically stated. As students may suggest what appears to them to be the theme, the teacher helps them test their ideas against the elements of the story to validate what they have inferred. "Broad human values are the concern of literature. The theme makes a general comment about such values....The theme is implied by the action; it is

not directly stated....To be significant the central idea (theme) must have wider application than the events of the novel."[1]

> What do you think the author is trying to say to you in this novel? What theme or broad idea about life and human values do you think the author may want you to have from reading this novel? (To the teacher: To initiate discussion, some suggestions may be made: Could it be that the author was saying that what we value changes? See **CONTENT** for other possibilities.)
>
> What is a symbol? Can you identify any symbols in the story? What might Uncle Will's unpainted church symbolize? What might Old Cannonball stand for?

EVALUATION

Although the informal discussion is itself an opportunity for the teacher to gauge student understanding of and reaction to the novel, many questions under **PROCEDURES** may be adapted to test either orally or in writing the students' understanding and recall of the novel following discussions. Evaluation, however, should be as painless as possible since one of the purposes of the unit is to overcome student reluctance to read.

If the students are not too adverse to writing, they might be asked to write a composition on how one of the characters develops, on an incident that illustrates what the character is like, on the theme of the novel, on their favorite scenes or characters, or on the effect that reading and discussing the novel has on their own attitudes toward the Negro and racial problems. Evaluate the writing on (1) the ability of the student to communicate and (2) the mechanics of writing skills displayed.

Also, several students may wish to select a scene from the novel and adapt it for dramatic presentation to the class.

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[1]Margaret Ryan, Teaching the Novel in Paperback (New York: MacMillan Company, 1963), pp. 50-51.

RESOURCES

Student Resources

Class Reading:

Haas, Ben. The Troubled Summer, New York: Grosset and Dunlap, Inc. (Tempo Book), 1969.

Supplementary Reading Suggestions:

Vroman, Mary E. Harlem Summer.

Griffin, John Howard. Black Like Me.

Gibson, Althea. I Always Wanted to Be Somebody.

Robinson, Jackie. Baseball Has Done It.

Hughes, Langston. Famous Negro Heroes of America.

Stratton, Madeline. Negroes Who Helped Build America.

Young, Margaret B. The First Book of American Negroes.

Davis, Sammy, Jr. and Boyar, Jane and Burt. Yes, I Can!

Rollins, Charlemae. They Showed the Way.

Sterling, Dorothy, and Quarles, Benjamin. Lift Every Voice.

Bontemps, Arna. Famous Biographies for Young People.

Haycox, Ernest. "A Question of Blood" (from I've Got a Name. Holt's Impact Series)

Gregory, Dick. "We Ain't Poor, Just Broke" (from I've Got a Name. Holt's Impact Series)

Sterling, Dorothy. "Tender Warriors" (from Coping. MacMillan.)

Shapiro, Milton J. "Mallie and Her Children" (from A Family Is a Way of Feeling. MacMillan's Gateway Series.)

Shotwell, Louisa R. "Roosevelt Grady" (from A Family Is a Way of Feeling. MacMillan's Gateway Series.)

Morgan, Carol McAfee. "Anita's Gift" (from A Family Is a Way of Feeling. MacMillan's Gateway Series.)

Foote, Horton. To Kill a Mockingbird (screenplay.)

Professional Resources

Ryan, Margaret. Teaching the Novel in Paperback. New York: MacMillan Company, 1963.

Schlakman, Soloman. Stories to Remember. New York: MacMillan Company, 1967.

GRADE 9

Genre: Drama

Theme: Human Relations and Values

A RAISIN IN THE SUN
by Lorraine Hansberry

OBJECTIVES

Teacher Purposes

To show how values influence behavior

To help students understand some of the differences in form between a story and a play

Desired Student Outcomes

Achieves some degree of empathy with fictional characters whose habits, values, and environment may differ considerably from his own

Begins to understand how man's relation to his environment can profoundly influence his spiritual outlook

Forms impressions of character traits and recognizes how a playwright reveals character through dialogue

Begins to interpret meaning rather than merely to express personal opinion

Understands to some degree the interplay of plot, character, and setting

OVERVIEW

Although the teacher in presenting A Raisin in the Sun should stress theme rather than genre, the students' attention should, however, be called to particular elements of the drama, notably the reliance on dialogue for exposition and character development. Little more need be done at this grade level with drama as an art form.

A Raisin in the Sun is not considered protest literature even though there are certain elements in the play that are currently more applicable to the Negro experience. The point to be stressed is that the play is about people who happen to be Negroes and about their unpretentious, frequently conflicting, dreams and the values generated by them.

A Raisin in the Sun provides each student with the opportunity to look beyond his immediate environment and observe the similarities and specific differences of people who are at once different and like himself.

CONTENT

Every character in A Raisin in the Sun has his special dream, even the families in the white neighborhood who are reluctant to accept the Younger family. Those dreams preoccupying the Youngers are human dreams and values peculiar to neither white nor black. Through study of this play, students should be led to see that a man's dreams are reflected in his values and, therefore, in his behavior. The fact that the Younger family is black unquestionably influences its dreams and its values and even warps them. But the unrealistic quality of Walter Younger's dreams is not peculiar to his race, and his mother's desire for a decent home is one shared by all mothers.

Walter's dreams of rising above his environment and of achieving material success blinds him to the values that serve man as an anchor: integrity and self-respect. His poverty and his inability to provide for his family cause him to believe that only through material success can he find identity as a man, an individual. For him, materialistic achievement has been so long deferred that his desire has begun "to fester like a sore." Only at the end of the play when he is faced with the choice of bartering his pride for money does he perceive that pride and self-respect are true measures of manhood.

PROCEDURES AND ACTIVITIES

It is suggested that the more able students first read the play in its entirety outside of class. Then, armed with a general understanding of the plot and the characters, the students can be assigned parts to be read aloud in front of the class. This procedure prepares students for oral reading and gives the play an immediacy that it lacks in a silent reading. It also graphically points up the appeal of dramatic literature which is, after all, meant to be seen and heard. Less able students may need to approach the silent reading act by act followed by oral reading and discussion before proceeding to the next act.

After the play has been silently read, the study questions which follow may be used as a basis for discussion. They may also be given to the students in advance to serve as a guide to their first silent reading.

These questions are neither exhaustive nor even appropriate for all classes. The teacher will undoubtedly want to frame questions of his own or to adapt these to his class situation.

Two poems, relevant to the title poem by Langston Hughes and to the play itself, are added at the end of the Study Guide. With able classes a discussion of them might be profitable.

STUDY GUIDE[1]

Act I Scene I

Read the Langston Hughes poem "Dream Deferred" used by the playwright as an introduction.

Do we all have dreams (aspirations)? Are they always realistic?

Explain the term "a dream deferred." Give an example of such a dream.

What are the six eventualities the poet suggests might happen to such a deferred dream?

How might a dream do any one of the following suggested in the poem: dry up, fester, stink, crust over, sag, or explode?

What is preoccupying the Younger family as the play opens? How has this preoccupation affected Walter Lee? Ruth? Beneatha?

What does Walter Lee do for a living? What do the other members of the family do?

What is the basis of the running quarrel between Beneatha and Walter Lee? (p. 26)

Before this scene ends, each member of the family reveals his dream.

How does the playwright accomplish this? What are these dreams? Whose dream has been deferred the longest? How do the individual dreams reveal the values of each character?

In terms of the introductory poem, what has happened to Mama's dress?

Why does Beneatha have difficulty in communicating her dream to the others? (pp. 35-36)

How does Walter Lee's dream differ from Beneatha's?

Explain Beneatha's words on page 40 ". . . all the tyranny in the world will never put a God in the heavens." How does this statement confirm what we already know about Beneatha?

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[1]Page references cited are to the Signet, New American Library, 1959 edition of Lorraine Hansberry's A Raisin in the Sun.

Mama says (page 40) in speaking of her children that ". . . there's something come down between me and them that don't let us understand each other and I don't know what it is. One done almost lost his mind thinking 'bout money all the time and the other done commence to talk about things I can't seem to understand in no form or fashion." What is it that has come between them?

Of what is Mama's plant a symbol? To what does she compare it? (p. 41)

Act I Scene II

What is the importance to the story of Ruth's discovery that she is pregnant?

Asagai's nickname for Beneatha is "Alaiyo," which means "One for whom bread is not enough." Is this an appropriate name for her? Explain. Could this name be given also to Walter Lee? Why?

What does Asagai mean when he says, "Assimilation is so popular in your country." (p. 49) Does he approve of it? How do you know? Why does his comment anger Beneatha? Would Walter Lee be considered an assimilationist? Why?

Explain Beneatha's statement (p. 49) to Asagai which he reminds her of: "Mr. Asagai, I want very much to talk to you about Africa. You see Mr. Asagai, I'm looking for my identity."

Why do you suppose the playwright included a character like Asagai in this play?

Why is the arrival of the check so important to the family? What does it symbolize?

Of what is Mama thinking when she says, "Ten thousand dollars they give you. Ten thousand dollars."? (p. 56)

How is Walter Lee's dream similar to that of his mother and of his wife? How is it different?

It is said that a person's values influence his actions. Find in this scene a speech of Mama's that makes the same point in different words. (p. 59)

What is it that Ruth and Mama want so desperately to talk to Walter Lee about?

What is Ruth planning to do about her new baby? Why? Find the lines in which we are given a clue to her intentions. (pp. 46, 61)

Reread the conversation between Mama and Walter Lee at the end of this scene. Explain the difference between Mama's and Walter Lee's values. Why can't they understand each other? Is Mama right to be angry or not? Explain your view. Find lines which show Mama's values. Find lines which show Walter Lee's. Have you noticed anything in your experience that might be comparable to this scene? (pp. 57-62)

Act II Scene 1

If Beneatha and George Murchison were to get married, do you think they would be happy? Explain.

What in your opinion has come between Walter Lee and Ruth? What relationship exists between this rift and the poem which introduces the play?

Why is Ruth concerned when she finds out where Mama has bought the house?

Act II Scene 2

Contrast George's view of an education with Beneatha's. Which view do you agree with? Why? Which view does the playwright want you to agree with? How can you tell? (p. 83)

Does George have a dream? What is it? How does it compare with Walter's?

Where does Mama indicate she has been? Why?

How has Walter Lee reacted to his mother's purchase of the house? Locate the lines in which we first learn of this. (p. 85)

What is Mama's response to Walter Lee's mood? What does she tell him to do?

What does Walter Lee's conversation with Travis on pages 88-89 reveal about him? What is your opinion of Walter's dream?

Act II Scene 3

Which of the Youngers first realizes what Mr. Lindner's mission is? Why is it natural that this should be so?

How does Mr. Lindner feel about his mission? How does he reveal this? Note Mr. Lindner's use of the word "dream." What comment does he make about the dreams of his community?

What is the exact nature of Mr. Lindner's mission?

Explain the significance of Beneatha's words on page 98, "Thirty pieces and not a coin less."

What is the news that Bobo brings the Youngers? What is revealed concerning Walter Lee's handling of the money Mama entrusted to him?

Act III

How does Beneatha explain her changed attitude to Asagai?

What offer does Asagai make her? What is her response?

What decision has Mama made in the light of the events of the last scene? What are her reasons?

What action does Walter Lee take to try to recoup his losses? Explain his plan.

What is the family's reaction to Walter's plan? Why do they react this way?

What does Walter think the white man wants to see? What is the "show" he says he is going to put on?

What is Mama's reason for refusing to permit Travis to be sent out of the room upon Mr. Lindner's arrival?

Why does Walter Lee suddenly change his plans? How does he tell Lindner of the change?

What has happened to the dream each in the family had? How does this relate to the introductory poem?

What is Mama probably thinking as the play ends and she stands alone in the apartment?

Do you think Beneatha will marry Asagai and go to Nigeria? Explain.

Could this play have been about a white family? If so, what might be different?

What might be the same?

The Play as a Whole

The following questions will serve to evaluate student understanding of the play:

Find passages (dialogue) that reveal clearly or suggest specific character traits. Name the traits.

Show how the action of the play is influenced by particular characteristics of the characters.

What do you think the action of the play means?

Explain how the setting has affected the action.

Related Activities

Read the following poems to the class and discuss their relevancy to the play. It might be of interest to point out that the poet, Countee Cullen, is a Negro.

Epitaph: For a Poet[3]
by Countee Cullen

Concrete Trap[4]
by Elizabeth Coatsworth

Suggestions for Possible Related Independent Reading

Willow Hill by Phyllis A. Whitney. A high school student successfully meets the problems which arise when a Negro housing project becomes a matter of concern to some citizens in a suburban community.

Peaceable Lane by Kenneth Wheeler. This best-selling novel deals with the dramatic tensions arising when a Negro family moves into a suburban white community.

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[3]Reproduced by permission of Ida M. Cullen and Harper and Row, Publishers, Incorporated

[4]Reproduced by permission of The Saturday Review Associates, Inc.

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EVALUATIVE TECHNIQUES

Have groups of students select scenes from the play to dramatize before the class. Evaluate on oral interpretative skills demonstrated.

Have students construct a model of a set for A Raisin in the Sun which includes details suggested by the author in his opening description and by the action of the play. Evaluate on his accuracy of inclusion of details.

Have students discuss in depth either orally or in writing one of the topics suggested below. Teachers should evaluate the composition for skills and emphasis set within the composition assignment.

Have students read "Epitaph: For a Poet" by Countee Cullen or "Concrete Trap" by Elizabeth Coatsworth and discuss the relationship of the poem of their choice to the theme of the play.

Assign several questions from PROCEDURES AND ACTIVITIES for written or oral discussion. Evaluate for accuracy of information or validity of interpretation.

Have students select three characters from the play and show how the characters' values influence their actions. Evaluate for validity of interpretation.

Ask students to determine whether or not A Raisin in the Sun could be written about a white person and how the play would be similar or different.

Have students determine whether Mama, who keeps the family together, or Walter Lee, who gives up his dream for the others, is the stronger character. Have them validate their answer by specific references to text.

Have students discuss the use of symbolism in the play, noting particularly references to the plant, the check, the frequent references to sunlight, and the characters themselves. Evaluate for validity of inference.

STUDENT RESOURCES

Hansberry, Lorraine. A Raisin in the Sun. New York: New American Library, Inc. (Signet), 1959.

—. A Raisin in the Sun. New York: Random House, 1959.

Grade 10

Genre: Biography

Theme: Character and Conflict

A CHOICE OF WEAPONS
An autobiography by Gordon Parks

Mature readers should study the unabridged edition of A CHOICE OF WEAPONS, published by Berkley Medallion Books; an abridged version for slow readers is available from Noble and Noble, Publishers (A Falcon Book).

OBJECTIVES

Teacher Purposes

To help students comprehend that all men face basic human problems

To help students realize that, while societal influences are important, even greater determinants come from the family

To help students realize that one's character determines his behavioral response

To teach students to read an autobiography with insight and with the realization that biography concerns the molding of a man's character

To help students see the relationship between the fact of biography and the truth of fiction

To acquaint students with one Negro's achievement in his field

Desired Student Outcomes

Gains insight into a human being's effort to achieve dignity against groundless prejudice

Understands that one's attitude is determined by individual, familial, and social factors

Realizes that the literal accomplishment of goals is perhaps less important than one's point of view and choice of means toward reaching them

Comprehends society's responsibility to its citizens

Understands the similarities and differences between fiction and biography

OVERVIEW

In the emotional heat of this decade when Afro-Americans and the disadvantaged of all colors are seeking not only the civil rights due them as citizens, but also the image due them as human beings entitled to and deserving of dignity, the teacher has a weighty obligation. For the teacher in a democratic society it should be axiomatic that people be regarded as people. In introducing the white suburban student to the biography of a member of a minority group and his society-imposed status, the teacher should have a twofold purpose: to teach biography as a form of literature through which one may gain insight about human beings and to teach this particular autobiography, A CHOICE OF WEAPONS, to emphasize that a member of a minority group is a person worthy of respect and entitled to the dignity which every human being should be able to claim from his fellow citizens.

In introducing the biography to students of minority groups, the teacher has an additional dimension to his purposes. The Afro-American in the book <u>is</u> a person in his own right; the burden of decency in treatment lies with him <u>who is indecent</u>. In A CHOICE OF WEAPONS, Mr. Gordon Parks makes this point explicitly and implicitly clear in both title and text. The disadvantaged can choose his "weapon"; in Mr. Parks's case it was a camera with which he fought poverty. In the text he demonstrates in episode after episode that brutality and white men's prejudice against the Negro evoke brutality and prejudice but that personal involvement and human kindness bring in their train normalcy and workable relationships. Mr. Parks was able, after each episode of humiliation and anger, to steady himself psychologically because of the strength he received in childhood from his mother's training. The strength of his pride and endurance lay in the attitudes he derived from his early years.

CONTENT

A man finds his identity not only as a Negro but as a man and matures through his choice of weapons—education, pride, endurance.

PROCEDURES AND ACTIVITIES

Have students read A CHOICE OF WEAPONS in its entirety before discussion.

(The teacher should consult the illustrative unit on biography, Bulletin #185, Part III, pp. X-11 through X-15, for general information and techniques on the teaching of the biography.)

Ask students questions about the genre. (See samples of questions on pp. X-13 and X-14, Bulletin #185, Part III.)

Ask students questions about A CHOICE OF WEAPONS in particular.

Why is it important to read the biography of a black American?

Have you seen evidence of any of Mr. Parks's achievement?

> (Students may consult such magazines as Life, Vol. 64, No. 10, March 8, 1968, "Cycle of Despair," p. 48; Life, Vol. 64, No. 13, March 29, 1968, "Letter," p. 23; Life, Vol. 64, No. 16, April 19, 1968, "Martin Luther King: the Impact," p. 28; Newsweek, Vol. XXX, No. 18, April 29, 1968, "Color-Blind Camera," p. 86; Life, Vol. 61, No. 11, September 9, 1966, "Muhammed Ali," p. 76; Life, Vol. 60, No. 4, January 28, 1966, "I Make My Choice of Weapons," p. 62.)

How do Mr. Parks's photographs of poverty heighten people's awareness of poverty?

What was Mr. Parks's basic teaching from his mother that sustained him in his difficult relationships with whites and gave him a moral base? Possible responses:

> "Now I felt a permanent anger after each clash. And I was becoming more sensitive to any situation that revealed a white man's attitude toward me. I never feared him or stood in awe of his achievements. 'If a white boy can do it, so can you,' Momma used to say, 'so don't ever give me your color as a cause for failing.' She made everything seem possible, even during the bleakest years; by feeding my young mind with all the things one could do in spite of the color of one's skin. Painstakingly, she was building a confidence and integrity in me."[1]

> "White people were making it easy for me to hate white people."[2]

> "This strange, indecent ritual had taught me that degradation was no respecter of color: the truth of the lesson fell triphammer hard. And in a wordless way I felt exalted, reassured—knowing that I would never sink to such a depth."[3] (The students may well find additional passages to quote.)

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[1]Gordon Parks, A Choice of Weapons, (New York: Berkley Medallion Books, 1967), p. 84.

[2]Ibid., p. 109.

[3]Ibid., p. 65.

What qualities sustained Mr. Parks?

The student has a wide range of answers here, but he should support the quality he names with quotations which may support different characteristics. Possible answers to elicit:

(1) Endurance and patience:

"So at twenty I found myself an invalid. . . . I knew that I would never go back to school. For the next five months I sat in the dark of my room rejecting time, light and reason. . . . I finally opened a book one rainy afternoon. And gradually I began to read, think and hope again. One thing was clear. I couldn't escape my fate by trying to outrun it. I would have to take my time from now on, and grow in the light of my own particular experience—and accept the slowness of things that were meant to be slow. . . ."[4]

(2) Honesty:

"And, despite my ingenious attempts, I couldn't justify my wrong through either need or hunger. What, I wondered, had happened to my sense of right and wrong? My mother's religious teaching?. . . . I rather selfishly concluded that it was the church that was at fault, not I. The contradictions, borne by the people who called themselves Christians, had killed my faith. It was God, whom I had always assumed to be white, who gave us such a strange birth. . . . Still, after such a noble try at self-absolution, I went to sleep knowing that my actions, and my character, lay in my own hands. My conscience would not allow me to condemn God, the church or the evil of others for what I had brought upon myself."[5]

"I realized, for the first time, that my fears had been generously fed by my own insecurity, that there was far more selfishness in my heart than I could comfortably live with."[6]

When he is frustrated and spoiling for a fight, "With some difficulty I came to terms with myself."[7]

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[4]Ibid., p. 76.

[5]Ibid., pp. 106-107.

[6]Ibid., p. 104.

[7]Ibid., p. 220.

(3) Pride:

"He could have understood if he had known how much the thought of failure repelled me. I was locked in a bitter struggle with pride. And I was in love. This alone, I felt, made one invincible."[8]

"And walking along I found that, in spite of my color, I was a stranger here (Harlem)."[9]

"When the Chicago Northwestern Railway hired me on a bar car as a porter, I decided then and there that I was an assistant bartender. It had more dignity and sounded much better, I thought. I was not altogether a liar. I did serve drinks after the bartender had made them; but my specific duty was that of a porter—a title which I prefer not to mention again. But, most importantly, I had a regular salary and a source for tips."[10]

(4) Determination to achieve:

"My experience had left me scarred and angry at times, but now I was bringing my hopes back to the shadowy ghetto, to see if they would take root in the asphalt of the city streets, would sprout in the smoke and soot, grow in barren days and nights—and at last know fruition. . . . My mother had freed me from the curse of inferiority long before she died by not allowing me to take refuge in the excuse that I had been born black. She had given me ambition and purpose; and set the course I had since traveled. . . . Poverty and bigotry would still be around, but at last I could fight them on even terms. The significant thing was a choice of weapons with which to fight them most effectively. That I would accept those of a mother who placed love, dignity and hard work over hatred was a fate that had accompanied me from her womb."[11]

What period in history does A CHOICE OF WEAPONS cover?

The teacher may want to call attention to the Depression when drought caused disaster in the cotton fields as well as in agricultural areas generally and many poor people sought work in cities. The period of WPA (Works Progress Administration), FWA (Federal Works Administration), CCC (Civilian Conservation Corps), and The New Deal (Franklin Roosevelt's governmental attack on industrial breakdown and poverty) were efforts to help the population. Mr. Parks was able to join the

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[8] Ibid., p. 89.

[9] Ibid., p. 92.

[10] Ibid., p. 159.

[11] Ibid., pp. 221-222.

CCC and later received a leg up when he secured a Rosenwald Fund grant that enabled him to earn $200 monthly while working (taking photographs) for the FSA (Farm Security Administration). One glimpses in the biography something of the country's desolation as one reads it in GRAPES OF WRATH by John Steinbeck and sees the special hardships suffered by certain groups.

The autobiography, which touches upon World War II, is a graphic description of the separated and prejudiced Negro and white fighting units. The teacher may find students interested in seeking out the legislation that eliminated segregation in the armed services by the end of World War II (July 26, 1948) and the FEPC (Fair Employment Practices Committee formed by President Roosevelt May 31, 1943) that ended discrimination in hiring wherever the Federal Government was concerned.

Had Mr. Parks the ability to relate to others, black and white?

Identification with his people:

"But the injuries I received the night before kept gathering all the misfortune and futility I had known since childhood. They had, in a way, become symbolic of failure, making all the efforts of the last years meaningless. I was suffering with the others now—those imprisoned in slave ships from Africa hundreds of years before, those strung up by their necks in hatred-filled Delta bottoms, those gunned to death for 'looking the wrong way' at some Southern white lady. . . ."[12]

". . .but they wanted white waiters and dishwashers and the plumber wanted a white helper. The ads said so."[13]

Identification with whites:

"I had already made matters worse by going into debt for new photographic equipment to Harvey Goldstein, the dealer from whom we had bought the press camera. He had a blind faith in me, although he had no reason for such trust; I hadn't paid him a cent all summer. But he gave me everything I asked for, including plenty of helpful advice."[14]

"And I prayed for him. . .to let him see again. And I prayed that he wouldn't hate what he saw when they finally removed the bandages."[15]

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[12]Ibid., p. 84.

[13]Ibid., p. 95.

[14]Ibid., p. 158.

[15]Ibid., p. 126.

When his buddy was out of bandages, the buddy said to Gordon Parks, "Well, I swear, I thought you was white." To which he replied, "And I swear, sometimes I thought maybe you were colored."[16]

(About white friends) "Their friendships counteracted the animosity I might have built against all whites—especially at that period."[17]

"We (he and his friends, a white man and a white woman) were upsetting the established order of things, we knew, but we would not sacrifice our friendship to it. We never spoke to one another about the problem. It belonged to those who invented it inside their own hearts."[18]

(John Vachon, his white friend who was refused service in a Negro restaurant) "'Well, buddy,' John said, 'now I know what it's like.'"[19]

(At a going-away party for him by white co-workers) "In the beginning I would never have believed that such a thing could happen. But now they were all standing about smiling, drinking, and wishing me good luck. And all doubts I had harbored were instantly replaced by the joy of this last hour."[20]

EVALUATIVE ACTIVITIES

Assign the writing of a character sketch of Mr. Parks. (See Structured Composition, Writing Assignment #9.) Evaluate for skills and emphasize standards set within the assignment.

Assign writing on a personal problem of a person. (See Structured Composition, Writing Assignment #4.) Evaluate according to skills and emphasis determined within the assignment.

Prepare a report (individual or committee) for the class on photography taken by Mr. Parks. Relate his photography to his own experiences with poverty. Evaluate according to oral composition standards set by class in advance of the report.

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[16] Ibid., p. 130.

[17] Ibid., p. 190.

[18] Ibid., p. 191.

[19] Ibid., p. 192.

[20] Ibid., p. 204.

Report in writing or in oral presentation on a limited aspect of the book. Evaluate for organization, appeal, and presentation.

Test for content (low priority).

RESOURCES

Student Resources

Parks, Gordon. A Choice of Weapons. New York: Berkley Publishing Corporation. (Berkley Medallion Book), 1967.

——. A Choice of Weapons. Noble and Noble, Publishers, Inc., (A Falcon Book), 1968.

Life - Vols. 60, 61, 64.

Newsweek - Vol. XXX.

Film

THE WEAPONS OF GORDON PARKS

Another in the series of ARTISTS AT WORK, the film takes a sociological point of view in presenting the life and work of Life photo-journalist Gordon Parks. Mr. Parks's weapons against poverty and prejudice are his talents and interests, at work and at leisure. Twenty-eight minutes—color. Available from the Enoch Pratt Library and, when purchased by Montgomery County, may be ordered from the Instructional Materials Center.

Suggested Biographies for Additional Reading Listed in

Bulletin 185 - Part III - pp. X-14 and X-15.

Negro Literature Bibliography - Montgomery County Publication (In preparation)